

Lessing, from the Standpoint of His Religious Views Before 1765

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Those who have discussed the religious principles of Lessing have almost invariably based their investigations and conclusions on the three great works of Lessing's life which have to do with religious subjects - "Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts", "Nathan der Weise", and Lessing's arguments in the series of controversies called forth by his publication of the Wolfenbüttel Fragments, - all these within the last decade of his life. To be sure there contain the best evidence; and it is the conclusions at which the mature man arrived in which we are the most interested. But it may also be of some benefit to consider for a moment the opinions which the younger Lessing held so as to be able to note the growth he made as well as to see how early he may have developed some of

the ideas which he first set forth systematically only in his latest writings. For Lessing always had opinions and he tells us as early as 1753 that "die Religion ist schon seit verschiedenen Jahren die Beschäftigung meiner ernsthaften Muse gewesen."

No attempt is going to be made to place Lessing in a certain class of men or in a specified school - neither as leader nor as follower does he belong there. Just as little as his independent mind and nature permitted him to be a docile disciple in any movement, just as little did it crave to be looked up to as a leader or teacher in any line of thought or action. As in literature, so in his religious views, does Lessing occupy a position apart.

On the other hand, it cannot be maintained that Lessing stood entirely alone in the opinions he held or that he was uninfluenced by the prevailing ideas of his time.

However the question of circumstance versus character may be decided, it must remain uncontested that no man can be entirely outside the sphere of influence of his contemporaries. Neither ~~was~~ Lessing, though he towered above them not only in acuteness of thought and keenness of intellect, but also in the facility and directness with which he gave expression to his ideas.

Lessing can scarcely be called orthodox. Neither were the times in which he lived orthodox. In fact we discover from the first of the century a distinct opposition to the old and traditional religious dogmas of the Evangelical and Roman churches. The Church of the times immediately succeeding the Reformation had gradually intrenched itself in a fortress of creeds and doctrines which the spirit of reverence for tradition guarded against all attacks of enemies outside the sphere of the church.

These creeds had become fixed and fossilized presided over entirely by a fossilized orthodox clergy and the religious life of the people encompassed in this frame of dead dogmas had become with them powerless and lifeless.

But a new spirit sprang up with the beginning of the eighteenth century and put a new face on religious conditions. Within the Lutheran church itself arose a class of men who later called themselves Pietists who upheld individual belief and the purity of the private life against the despotic rule of creed and dogma and the dogmatic preaching of the orthodox pastors. This movement of Pietism with Spener as its leader grew to wield great influence in Germany and became a formidable enemy to the artificial structures reared by the clergy of the old church.

These were days too, of strife

between sects - Lutheran against Reformed - and it was plain that certain trouble was brewing in the religious world. The old orthodoxy had plainly served its time and new forces were springing up in more than one quarter.

The Pietists cared little for a science of theology. They did not trouble themselves about the truth or falsity of certain tenets of the old church, but were concerned altogether with maintaining a standard of purity of life for the individual in accordance with the teachings of the Bible, rather than trusting for salvation to a set of dry formulas which belonged, not to Christianity as a whole, but had been developed by a sect.

On the other hand sprang up a movement just as much opposed to the existing orthodox church but having nothing in common with Pietism. This movement was introduced by Leibnitz with Wolff as its

propagator at Halle.

While in the old church the Bible, in the beginning the foundation of all, had come to be in a manner subordinate to creeds and was interpreted in the light of doctrines already established, which was often the cause of greatly perverting its meaning, the followers of Leibnitz and Wolff, the founders of the natural theology endeavored to interpret the teachings of the Bible according to reason and subjected everything to this critical test.

Wolff disseminated his doctrines in the university at Halle and Wolffianism came to be a formidable opponent both of the existing orthodoxy and of Pietism. It introduced as its point of support what finally became the watch-word of the century - judgment according to reason. Everything in relation to the Bible - its origin, growth, principles, had to come under the search light

of reason and what before in the teachings of the church had been shrouded in mystery was now brought out into the open.

The deistical movement of the eighteenth century had its origin in England with Lord Bolingbroke as its chief representative there. From England it crossed the channel into France which in its turn had a great influence on Germany. Its mouth-piece in France was Voltaire with whom Lessing during his residence at Berlin came into personal contact. Voltaire was not himself an atheist, but he was a representative of that deism which among many of his followers degenerated into atheism. He believed in a God but a God who was far removed from the little world of man and the private concerns of the individual. The religion of the deists in the end resolved itself into a system of morals. The churches,

Protestant and Roman were alike to Voltaire both forms of the same superstition. He ridiculed the fundamental doctrines of the church, the ideas of original sin, of the fall, the atonement, of Christ, and revelation. All alike came under the rain of his scathing witicism.

From these movements it is easy to perceive that the trend of the spirit of the century was away from all orthodox religion and toward free-thinking; - an attempt to measure and judge of everything according to the standard of reason, cold calculating, inflexible. If we listen for a moment to the words of one who had remained a faithful adherent of the Lutheran church, we shall see how conditions were viewed by those purer spirits who were of the better part of the church. It is Linnig's father himself who laments the condition of religious thought in his day and complains that in the many

changes which have taken place in the last fifty years none have seen the betterment of the Christian religion; that while the day of persecution has gone even a greater evil has taken its place for the day of free-thinking - 'Freigeisterei' - has come and the minds of men are ruled by it. "Der um sich gefessene Unglaube hat sich auf den Thron des Aberglaubens gesetzt. Die heilige Schrift hat jederman lesen aber auch schänden dürfen." There was, moreover, an indifference toward religion even among those who called themselves Christians and no good religious books were written or read.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was the son of a Lutheran minister in the days when it was fully expected that the oldest son should follow in the footsteps of his father. Not only was Gottfried Lessing himself a pastor, but back of him for long

generations extended a line of men of the same calling. Lessing was the first one in many a family to break the succession of mayors, advocates, and pastors. His grandfather, Theophilus Lessing, a man of large ability, had chosen as subject for his doctor's thesis "Von der Toleranz der Religionen." Johann Gottfried Lessing, the father of the author, was a scholar and a theologian, a man of talent, the pastor in the small town of Kamenz where Lessing was born. The father had written much on theological subjects, had translated theological works from French and English, and was really above the station which he occupied in life. Altho he was a strictly orthodox member of the Lutheran church, still he was not radical in his adherence to the one sect, but represented rather the broader idea of the opposition of Protestantism to the Papacy. On that idea was concentrated his zeal and

not on ^{the} petty controversies and backbitings of classes and sects.

The mother of Lessing was the daughter of a pastor but she is not thought to have exerted much influence over her son though she had most firmly set her heart on his becoming a minister and the disappointment of her hopes hurt her deeply.

Unless we are to consider that excess of any one thing, however good it may be in itself, creates a distaste for it, Lessing's early training certainly had a decided tendency to start him aright in path. His parents wished him to follow. Such a home would necessarily be pervaded by a distinctly religious atmosphere; and from his earliest childhood Lessing was surrounded by a spirit of reverence for religious things. And whatever may be said to the contrary, it seems more than probable to one who reads Lessing with this early training in mind, that there

spirit exercised a lasting influence on his life. Lessing, as we have remarked was not orthodox, he was in one sense of the word not a Christian, but the spirit of mockery of religious things which so often characterize the writings of many critics on religious subjects is ever absent from Lessing's words, and always he bowed his head in reverence before the religion of his father even tho he most emphatically denounced the tenets and creeds of some of its professors. Never in his writings is a trace found of the rude raillery which Voltaire so often employed in his criticisms of the Bible.

Prayers were constant in Lessing's home and as soon as he could talk he was taught passages from the Bible and his first poetry was hymns.

This influence was not destroyed however to remain long undisturbed. The school boy Lessing had as instructor a young man named Heritz, a disciple of the movement of Illuminism - Auf-

klärung- and was known as a free-thinker. He wrote an article on "The Stage as a School for Oratory" and was attacked immediately by all orthodox believers, Lessing's father among them; and the boy was consequently withdrawn from his influence, however great or little that may have been. Lessing was then further prepared for the Fürstenschule at Meissen by Pastor Linder and he entered there in the year 1741. Here, too, the religious atmosphere was all-prevailing. The Fürstenschule had been established for the children of rich and poor alike with the sole purpose of training up men who should be defenders of the Protestant religion and strong in the Evangelical faith. Here were to be formed theologians and pastors and the discipline and instruction were in accordance with this aim. The sphere of life was narrow, the discipline extremely strict, and the in-

struction, while very thorough, all tended along the one line. Twenty-five hours a week were devoted to devotional services and exposition of the Bible. Lessing himself however, stands as a striking example of the fact that the mill did not always grind out orthodox grain. It must have been with his brother in mind that Karl Lessing said of the pupils at Meissen: "Sie beteten viel aber frömmelten sehr wenig; und nur mehr vom Studiren als vom Beten hielt studierte ohne zu beten."

We may feel confident that Lessing studied for that is characteristic of him through life but we doubt as to his equal industry in devotion. Even as early as this the boy must have made up his mind that the calling for which his parents had destined him was not to be his, for his efforts were certainly not in that direction. We have, however, no express statement as to the fact.

He developed here that acuteness of mind, that love for delving to the bottom of the matter, that characterized what he did all through life. More than that, he exhibited that independence of spirit and disregard for established authority, which ~~was~~ probably caused one of the inspectors of the school to speak of him as "ein gutter Knabe nur etwas magnaui". The study of the ancients, which in the course was made entirely subordinate to the study of the Bible, he made an end in itself. In short, his young mind received here a stimulus toward mathematics, philosophy, natural science and literature, everything but religion.

By the time Lessing was seventeen years old, he had so far outgrown the restricted course at Meissen that he rebelled against staying there longer and was sent to the university at Leipzig.

At this point it seems as if

the "Zufall" of which Lessing himself so often speaks had entered in to still further divert the youth's mind from orthodox religious pursuits. Wittenberg, the home of the Reformation, and not Leipzig was the university which a student of theology would naturally be expected to attend in order to be in the proper atmosphere and gain the best results. But Lessing's father was not rich and Lessing was the eldest of many sons so the offer of a free "Stelle" at Leipzig was sufficient to cause a decision in favor of that university and Lessing was entered there in 1748 as a student in theology.

There was no especial theological stir or excitement in Leipzig at the time when Lessing entered the university. No movement had gone out from there as Pietism and Wolffianism had from Halle. So far the old orthodoxy had not been greatly disturbed though Gottsched stood for

1. Dangel, "Lessing's Leben und Werke", vol. I.

Wolffianism. But the professors of theology still taught the same dry lifeless theology in the same dry lifeless manner. Thus there was very little in the city or in the university to draw Lessing toward a study of orthodox theology, and on the other hand everything to distract him. For Leipzig was at this time the literary and social centre of Germany and the university was the centre of the city. It was the home of the aristocracy and of the well-to-do middle classes and full of life and activity - truly as Lessing wrote home to his mother "a little Paris." There were congregated the learned minds of the day, Gellert at the head of his school, and Gottsched encouraging the theatre and French tastes in literature. Peoples attention was drawn to science, literature philosophy - but not to religion.

Thrown into this maze of life and

action while still fresh from the quiet secluded life at Meissen, the boy Lessing lived for a time a life even more retired and isolated than he had there.

To his mother he wrote describing his first weeks at the university: "Stets bei den Büchern, nur mit mir selbst beschäftigt, dachte ich eben so selten an die übrigen Menschen als vielleicht an Gott. But Lessing's was not the nature to continue long as life so shut off from his fellow men and he soon plunged with all the ardor of his soul into the busy scenes around him. No thoughts now of ever settling his ^{pattently} thoughts on study for an orthodox Lutheran pastor. And if he still had clung to that idea, the friendships he made were not of the nature to draw him more towards it.

Most intimate perhaps of these, the one which gave his solicitous parents the most uneasiness and concern, was that with Mylius a young writer and decidedly a freethinker, condemned most severely by orthodox

thinkers because of his heretical views on the miracles of the Bible. Mylius looked with contempt upon the "kimmerliche orthodoxie" and published a paper which he called the "Freigeist." He said of himself that he was "ein Weltweiser, der die Vernunft und die Tugend liebt und die Vorurtheile und Laster hasst." As a Deist he believed only in a divine "Werkmeister" and in the immortality of the soul.

It was through Mylius that Lessing became acquainted with the theater and had his interest in the drama so thoroughly and significantly aroused. There, too, he became intimate with that class of comedians who roused so much the apprehension of his parents.

So much for Lessing's life outside of the university. Inside he pursued his studies with zeal, if not, as he himself confessed, with system or definite purpose. In the university of Leipzig at that time the bright lights were

Johann August Ernesti and Johann Christ, the founders of the new system of philological study of the eighteenth century, and exponents of the critical-historical movement. From Ernesti Lessing gained a lively interest in the old writers, and from Christ who was a man of rich intellect and culture, and acute historical insight, an increased impulse toward the study of the old poets and a distaste for Gottsched and his school. But he was influenced by them too in what was more important for his spiritual development. Ernesti was regarded as the founder of the new exegetical school whose dominant purpose was to secure an interpretation of the scriptures according to their own language, and not in the light of previously existing dogmas or prejudices of the church; to subject the utterances of the Bible to the light of reason, and let them stand or fall on their own merits. It was nominally orthodox but in-

dependent in his views.

Kästner, too, brought together the brightest intellects of Leipzig in his philosophical disputations and Lessing was not slow in being drawn into controversies of his own with his various friends where he soon learned to doubt all until he had tested and proved by reason.

There were perhaps more than any others among his instructors at the university exercised over Lessing, a double influence and brought him into touch not only with a new taste in literature but with a new spirit in theology. In this way the boy in his new surroundings and susceptible to all influences brought to bear upon him was being introduced at the same time to two of the forces which were at work undermining the old established creeds of the church - a new, ^{a new, and,} and, to an orthodox way of thinking, a dangerous attitude toward the scriptures.

Hagenbach, History of the Church in 17th and 18th centuries.

Lessing's parents, hearing of the company which their son was keeping at Leipzig, and disapproving most heartily of his intimacy with the Freigeist, Mylius, called him home on the pretext that his mother was ill. While there he wrote a sermon for his mother, whom he had so bitterly disappointed, in order to prove to her that if he chose he could "alle Tage Pfarrer werden könne." But though he had, by the time he returned to Leipzig, partly at least reconciled his parents to the course of action he had taken, he gave them no hope of ever seeing him in the pulpit of a Lutheran church.

Lessing's intimacy with Mylius continued, and in 1748 he followed him to Berlin where he was given employment on a paper of which Mylius was editor.

The atmosphere of the city of Berlin was at this time perhaps no more conducive to fostering

orthodox belief than Leipzig had been. The influence of Frederick the Great was everywhere strongly felt and Lessing, though he was never favoured by the great ruler, was always his admirer and now looked up to him with great reverence.

Frederick's leaning toward French ways and ideas made him peculiarly susceptible to the new freedom of spirit which was at this time rapidly making its way through Germany, especially as he was so slavishly influenced by Voltaire the leader of the new thought movement in France. Freedom was demanded in everything. The censorship of the press was for awhile removed and then on account of the abuse of the privilege was again put into operation. The spirit of immorality in literature and in religion was abroad and wherever breathed the atmosphere of Berlin could not well remain unaffected by it.

Voltaire was an active advocate of tolerance and Frederick too had been infected by it through him. Not the same tolerance as that of Lessing, as we shall see, but it doubtless had its influence on the youth especially through Voltaire's "Essais sur les mœurs et l'esprit des Nations" the key note of which is tolerance.

Some time after Lessing's arrival in Berlin, we read in a letter to his father what sounds as if the youth were still trying to make himself believe that he is perfectly regular in his belief and as if it were not only only his father but himself as well that he is trying to assure that all is well. "Wie haben Sie sich vorstellen können dass ich, wenn ich auch nach Wien gegangen wäre, dasselbst meine Religion würde verändert haben? Daraus kann ich schließen wie sehr Sie wider mich eingenommen sein müssen. Doch Gott, hoffe ich, soll mir Gelegenheit

gehen sowohl meine Liebe gegen meine Religion als gegen meine Eltern deutlich genug an Tag zu legen." And again, soon after, he tries to justify his leaning toward the theater and his love for play writing. "Der Beweis warum ein Komödienschreiber kein guter Christ sein könne kann ich nicht begründen. Ein Komödienschreiber ist ein Mensch der die Laster auf ihre lächerlichen Seite schildert. Darf denn ein Christ über die Laster nicht lachen? Und wenn ich nun gar verspräche eine Komödie zu machen die nicht nur die Hrn. Theologen lesen sondern auch loben sollen? Wie wenn ich eine auf die Freigister und auf die Verächter ihres Standes machte?"

This last letter touches upon a point which introduces us to some of the earliest of Lessing's writings which bear in any degree whatsoever upon his religious standpoint.

Although it was not until almost the end of Lessing's literary career - of

his life indeed - that we have any thing from his pen from which we can get anything which approaches an organized statement of his system of theology - if it may be called that - still it is apparent to one who reads many of his writings from his Leipzig career on that from his earliest years he maintained the liveliest interest in religious subjects. True, one who had been early trained as Lessing had been and who had his family traditions behind him could not well be utterly indifferent to such matters; but more than that it was in the nature of the man. Lessing did not live on the surface of things. Life with him was a serious, earnest matter and in the wide field of thought over which his active mind ranged the subject of religion could scarcely fail to receive more than a passing interest.

Although we have in Lessing's own words the declaration of his primary

object in writing the play called the "Freigeist," one cannot help feeling convinced on reading it that his motive was more to express his contempt for the narrow prejudices of the orthodox clergy than to decry free-thinking. It is thought by some that the model for the character of Theophan was Lessing's father. However that may be, it is true that Theophan represents the real Christian, the heart and feeling of the play and is a type of the best of the class upon which Lessing looked with respect if he did not altogether share their views. On the other hand Adrast is the representative of Verneunft. Lessing himself is in no one of the characters. While he holds the character of the Freigeist up to ridicule, at the same time he lets his satire fall heavily upon those who regard the Freigeist as a monster of evil. The defects in both he gives expression to in what he has

Luette say of Johann and Martin.
 "Aus Freigeisterei ist keiner ein Spitz-
 bulle und aus Frömmigkeit dieser
 ein Dummkopf."

Doubtless, however, a certain attitude
 on the part of Adrast is character-
 istic of Lessing at this time in
 his residence at Berlin. Adrast is
 not represented as being a true atheist
 but rather as forcing himself to
 believe and defend certain doctrines
 which in reality he does not more
 than half believe. We can infer
 with a good deal of certainty that
 Lessing himself was at this time
 in a state of doubt and indecis-
 ion but was trying to find his
 way to the light. In one of his
 letters to his father at this time are
 the words, "Der du einmal blü-
 lich gezweifelt hat und durch den
 Weg der Untersuchung zur Überzeug-
 ung gelangt hat oder sich wenig-
 stens noch dazzu zu gelangen
bestrebt." To Lessing the question

came all through life, "What is truth?" It was a problem he was continually trying to solve. Yet, strange as it may seem, Lessing liked this state of doubting and striving for truth. He once said that if God should hold out to him both hands, in one hand Truth, in the other Doubt, and ask him to choose, he would choose Doubt and say "Father, pure Truth is for Thee alone."

The play results in the triumph of Heart or Feeling personified in Theophan over cold and critical Reason personified in Adrast. This attitude agrees with that taken by Lessing in some of his other early works, the "Gedanken über die Hurnhuter," ^{for example} in which "Thun" is represented as the essence of man's purpose rather than "Vernünfteln." For "Herz" means not "Schwärmerei," but the right impulse of the heart which leads to right living, and "Vernunft" not the legitimate process of finding one's way seriously to the

truth, but perverted reason which quibbles and argues for the mere sake of the argument, and acts out of mistaken motives. Theophaan brings out this thought when he says to Adrast: "Es (Ihr Herz) ist zu gut Ihrem Geist zu dienen, den ein Ansehen von Gründlichkeit zu glänzenden Irrthümern dahineisst und der aus Begierde bemerkt zu werden Sie mit aller Gewalt zu etwas machen will was nur Feinde der Tugend, was nur Bösewichter, sein sollten. Nennen Sie es wie Sie wollen - Freidenker, starker Geist, Drist. ----- Es ist ein Ungeheuer, es ist die Schande der Menschheit etc." and again, "Ihr eigen Herz, welches unendlich besser ist als es Ihr Nitz, der sich in gewisse grosse Meinungen verliebt hat, vielleicht wünschet."

In spite of the play's having been intended as one which the clergy should not only read but praise, as it represents the triumph of one of their order over a Freigeist yet Theophaan does not typify the orthodox clergy, ^{which learning}

so often severely measures but the ideal of the order; and seeing this early exhibits that hatred of intolerance which characterizes his life; and he cannot restrain some very telling thrusts at the ~~charge~~ intolerance of many of the "Geistlichen." "Denn Herr ein Atheist!" cried Martin to Johann, "Das glaubt sonst einer! Er sieht ja aus wie ich und du. Er hat Hände und Füße, er hat das Maul in der Breite und die Nase in der Länge wie ein Mensch. Er red't wie ein Mensch; er ist wie ein Mensch - und soll ein Atheist sein? Es ist eine Pest der Erde, ein Vieh, --- ein Seelenkannibal, ein Antichrist --- ja das ist ein Atheist. So hat ihn unser Pfarrer abgemalt; der kennt ihn aus grossen Büchern."

And again Adrast to Theophan:
 "Ihr Mund würde mich keine gute Seite geziehen haben die mir Ihre innere Überzeugung nicht zugestehet. Sie würden mich geradweg einen Ruchlosen gehalten haben der sich

der Religion nur den Augen zu entziehen suchte damit er seinen Lüsten desto sicherer nachhängen könne. - - - Sie würden keine Verwünschungen gespart kurz, die würden sich so erweisen haben wie sich ein Theolog gegen die Krächter seines Aberglaubens -- erweisen muss.

Perhaps Theophan expresses as well as anyone in the play Lessing's idea at this time in regard to the so-called freethinkers, and again we hear a plea for tolerance in the words: "Adrast, wir ich überzeugt bin, ist von derjenigen Art Freigeister" die wohl etwas besser zu sein verdienen. Es ist auch sehr begreiflich dass man in der Jugend so etwas gleichsam wider Willen werden kann. Man ist es aber abedann nur so lange bis der Verstand zu einer gewissen Reife gelangt ist, und sich das aufwallende Geblüte abgekühlt hat. Auf diesem kritischen Punkte steht jetzt Adrast, aber noch mit wankenden Fusse.

¹ Act I Sc. I.

² Act IV Sc. I

It is Julian who best voices Lessing's respect for religion as a true guide of life.

"Nein, Adrast! die Religion ist eine
 Zierde für alle Menschen und muss
 ihre unentbehrlichste Zierde sein. Was kann
 unsere Seele mit erhabeneren Begriffen
 füllen als die Religion? Und worin
 kann die Schönheit der Seele anders
 bestehen als in solchen Begriffen? in
 würdigen Begriffen von Gott, von uns,
 von unsern Pflichten, von unserer
 Bestimmung? Was kann unser Herz
 unser Herz, diesen Sammelplatz ver-
 derben und unruhiger Leidenschaften,
 mehr Unruhigen als eben diese Religion?
 --- Was kann uns zu wahrern Menschen,
 zu bessern Bürgern, zu aufrichtigeren
 Freunden machen als sie?"

Lessing's intimacy with Mylius
 did not continue long after he went
 to Berlin but there came into his life
 two other men with whom he kept
 up a very close friendship as long
 as he lived. They were Friedrich Nicolai

and Moses Mendelssohn. Both were representatives of the "Aufklärung" movement and of deism. From 1765 on in Berlin Nicolai was the publisher of a work called the "Universal German Library" with which fifty or more writers were in connection. It was the mouthpiece of all those who opposed fanaticism, superstition or prejudice in any form. It was the high tribunal of Rationalism, a merciless critic cold heartless basing everything on understanding and reason. Its boasted tolerance soon changed into extreme intolerance and bigotry.

The career of Moses Mendelssohn was in a manner made by Lessing and he in turn exercised an influence over Lessing which did not in the least tend to strengthen orthodox belief.

We can speak of the influence of different men on Lessing only in a relative degree. He was one who doubted until he had proved; and

¹ Hagenbach, History of the Church in the 17th and 18th Centuries.

was filled with such an independence that it often led him to contrariness and inclined him rather to the opposite side, for Lessing never followed tamely in any beaten track.

If there is any one idea which can be said to be the key-note to Lessing's critical and polemical writings, and to his opinions on religious subjects in general, it is the idea of tolerance. He struck that note in one of his earliest plays, "Die Juden" and sounded it in its fullness and perfectness only in his last great poem, "Nathan der Weise." Both deal with the same nation, at that time so downtrodden and despised in all countries of Europe. It is true that Lessing's close friendship with, and love for Moses Mendelssohn greatly influenced his ideas in regard to that people in particular. But while his later and more fully developed knowledge in regard to the Jews doubtless came through his philos-

other friend, it is significant for his early ideas on tolerance that the play, "Die Juden," was written before he became acquainted with Mendelssohn, and shows that he was unimpressed by personal relations. The drama gives expression solely to Lessing's nature which was a constant cry against blind prejudice and for untrammelled freedom in thought belief, action, and everything.

We must distinguish, however, between the tolerance of Lessing and that of such men as were many of the deists and illuminists of the day. His tolerance was not that which says to the world: "I am absolutely indifferent in regard to what you believe. I have myself no belief and care not for what my fellow-man believes." Lessing did have a belief and was not indifferent to that of others but his struggle was against that intolerance which set up arbitrary standards

and maintained that they were right and all others wrong.

In "Die Juden", Martin Krumm expresses very well the prevailing sentiment toward the Jews at that time and through him again Lessing makes his thrust at the clergy.

"So viel als ihrer sind, keinen ausgenommen, sind Betrüger, Diebe, und Strassen-räuber. Darum ist es auch ein Volk das der liebe Gott verflucht hat.

--- Ach, Gott behüte alle rechtschaffne Christen vor diesen Leuten. Wenn sie der liebe Gott nicht selber hasste weswegen wären denn nur vor Kurzem bei dem Unglücke in Breslau ihrer bald noch ~~weniger~~ einmal so viel als Christen geblieben? Unser Herr Pfarr erinnerte das sehr weislich in der letzten Predigt."

"Der Reissende" also reveals the attitude of the Christians toward the Jews, from another standpoint however.

"Wenn ein Jude betrügt so hat ihn unter neun Fällen der Christ vielleicht sieben mal dazu genötiget. Ich zweifle

ob viele Christen sich rühmen können mit einem Juden aufrichtig verfahren zu sein. Und sie wundern sich wenn er ihnen gleiches mit gleichem zu vergelten sucht. Sollen Treu und Redlichkeit unter zwei Völkerschaften herrschen so müssen beide gleich viel dazu beitragen."

And we can distinctly hear a prophecy of "Nathan der Weise" in the words of the Reisende to the Baron.

"Ihnen die Wahrheit zu gestehen, ich bin kein Freund allgemeiner Urtheile über ganze Völker. -- Ich sollte glauben dass es unter allen Nationen gute und böse Seelen geben könnte."

But what in the whole play speaks most strongly Lessings conviction of what a Jew can be is the noble, generous character of the Reisende himself. As a matter of course, this conception of a Jew would not go unchallenged by those less prejudiced than Lessing himself and he was often compelled to defend the character in

the drama. In his remarks on "Die Juden" in "Zur Dramatischen Poesie" he says: "Besteht man aber darauf dass Reichthum, bessere Erfahrung, ein aufgeklärter Verstand, nur bei einem Juden keine Wirkung haben könnten, so muss ich sagen dass dieses eben das Vorurtheil ist welches ich durch mein Lustspiel zu schwächen gesucht habe; ein Vorurtheil dass nur aus Stolz oder Hass fließen kann und die Juden nicht bloss zu rohen Menschen macht, sondern sie in der That mit unter (allen) die Menschheit setzt. --- Ich sage es gerade heraus - noch abedenn wenn mein Reueider ein Christ wäre, würde sein Charakter sehr selten sein."

In yet another one of Lessing's "Jugenddramen", one written while he was yet at Leipzig, do we find sentiments expressed in regard to the orthodox clergy which are in a large measure at least, Lessing's own. In "Der junge Gelehrte" Dammis says:

"Die Geistlichen überhaupt sind

schlechte Helden in der Gelehrsamkeit." and again "Der Theolog glaubt dich (die Gelehrsamkeit) bei einer Menge heiliger Sprüche, fürchterlicher Erzählungen, und einigen übel angebrachten Figuren zu krützen."²

Although numerous references to religious and theological subjects may be found in almost any of Lessing's writings, we have no discussion on any purely theological matter until his residence of one year in Wittenberg from 1751 to 1752. As a result of his life and study there we have several short writings, some only fragments, which are of importance in so far as they indicate the condition of Lessing's opinions at so early a stage in his career. He went to Wittenberg to study and the atmosphere of the city and university led him to make a special study of the period of the Reformation. Moreover his reading of Bayle had directed his attention to the Gelehrtenge-schichte and the result of these two

¹ Der junge Gelehrte act I Scene I.

² Id.

lines of investigation is the Rettungen, Lessing and the French sceptic Peter Bayle were to a large degree kindred spirits and the writings Bayle exercised a great influence upon Lessing though, as was always the case, any ideas he got from Bayle took their characteristic form with him, for Lessing was never a slavish imitator. Bayle was a forerunner of the Aufklärung movement of the eighteenth century. He was an avowed enemy of the clergy and waged continual warfare with them. He had reached a height distant from all sects and parties from which he persecuted the machinations of superstition every moment ready to shoot his sharp arrows at the theological archenemy especially the order of the Jesuits. He lived in the time of the strife of sects and in the bitterness of his hatred for their petty struggles he turned almost against religion itself. But he was not a Freigeist. "Sein vielberühmter Skepticismus"

war nichts anders als jener Process der allseitigen Verlebendigung und Vergeistigung der Gelehrsamkeit selbst." is the opinion which Danzel gives of him.

With his loss of freedom and tolerance he drew the admiration and attention of Lessing and the Kettneren are largely due to the impulse given by the study of Bayle's works.

The question has been raised by some as to whether Lessing had any settled opinions on matters of religion before 1765 or 1770. To one reading these early writings which received their impulse at Wittenberg this could scarcely seem a matter of doubt. Not that his opinions remained unchanged. But Lessing never accepted things on faith. He considered it his duty to investigate before expressing an opinion; and we have his own word for it that he had from the earliest years thought seriously on these matters. He said in regard to the controversy with Göze that he

was drawn into it by the hair, not because he was not sure of his subject for he had always considered it his duty to try with his own eyes the truth of the Christian religion; that in his time writings for the truth of Christianity were *Modeschriften* and he read them. Then he could not rest until he had read the other side and in this way he was torn from one side to the other. "Je bundiger mir der eine das Christenthum erweisen wollte desto zweifelhafter ward ich. Je muthwilliger und triumphirender mir es der andere ganz zu Boden treten wollte desto geneigter fühlte ich mich es umgesehen in meinem Herzen aufrecht zu erhalten."

In his "Retting des Cardanus" Lessing takes occasion first to defend Cardanus in his Comparison or Controversy of the four religions - heathen Jewish, Mohammedan and Christian by saying: "Was ist nötiger als sich von seinem Glauben zu überzeugen und was

ist unmöglicher als Überzeugung ohne vorhergegangene Prüfung? And in answer to the objection that it may be dangerous to one's faith to investigate other religions:

"Der muss ein schwacher Vertrauen auf die ewigen Wahrheiten des Heilandes haben der sich fürchtet sie mit Lügen gegen einander zu halten."

He maintained that Cardanus, far from putting weaker arguments into the mouth of the Christian had indeed had him utter stronger ones than Jew or Mohammedan. And as Lessing in turn has the Jew and Mohammedan refute what the Christian has said, he proves that he has indeed investigated the other side.

In the Rettung des Cochläus Lessing grants that Cochläus must certainly be hated by all good Lutherans because he did Luther much injustice and did not act as an honorable, truth-loving opponent. He proves, however, that Cochläus was not the first to accuse Luther of having started the

Reformation out of jealousy because the Ablass was given to the Dominicans instead of to his own order. At the same time he declares that such a thing is entirely inconsistent with the unselfish and magnanimous character of Luther; but that even if it were true the results of the Reformation are none the less great and beneficial to the world. God does not always choose the most perfect, but the most convenient instruments to accomplish his purpose; And we none the less owe the Reformation to the "Vorsehung des Himmels."

The "Gedanken über die Herrnhuter" was not published until after Lessing's death but was probably written between 1750 and 1755. His brother Karl Lessing regarded it as the earliest of Lessing's writings on theology. In it he takes the part of the Herrnhuter against the "Geistlichen" and maintains that the latter did not win a real victory over the

Herrnhuter.

This idea of the development of religion as expressed here strikes the same note as "Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts" which indicates that Lessing had decided opinions on the subject as early even as this.

The old Jews, honored especially by God, gradually added to their simple religion according to their own notions; and gradually the number of "selbst erwählter Gebräuche" grew so great that the true conception of God was lost in the mass of formulas and rites. No mortal could rescue them. Therefore Christ came to restore religion in its simplicity. "Gott ist ein Geist. Den sollt Ihr anbeten" was His teaching and Lessing asks "Welcher Satz ist vermögend der alle Art der Religion zu verbinden als dieser?"

Again, when the early Christians ceased to suffer persecution they too degenerated and began to support and add

to the the divine truth by human proofs until finally all came to depend on one man (the pope) der desto öfter irte je sicherer er irren konnte.

Huss and others came ^{who} thought differently and were burned for their beliefs. How did it happen that Truth won so little through Luther and others like him? How fortunate it would have been for them if they had had successors as pious as learned. The same thought is in the opening words of the article: "Glückselige Zeiten als der Tugendhafteste der Gelehrteste war. Als alle Weisheit in kurzen Lebensregeln bestand." And he sums it all up in the one sentence which is really the key note to this discussion "Was heißt es recht zu glauben wenn man unrecht lebt?" And he continues "Der Aberglaube fiel, aber eben das wodurch Ihr eben stürztet - die Vernunft - die so schwer in ihrer Sphäre zu erhalten ist - die Vernunft führte euch auf einem andern Irrweg der zwar wenig von der Wahrheit

doch desto weiter von der Ausübung der Pflichten eines Christen entfernt wäre."

Now, he maintains, that men have such a splendid combination of *Melweisheit* and *Gottesgelabtheit* "a true Christian is more rare than in darker times."

What Lessing conceives to be the mission of the *Herrnhuter* is to lead the simple virtuous life. Suppose a man were to come who despised the knowledge of the *Melweisen* and pointed only to the one thing that can make a happy life - virtue - he would teach not only to believe in God but what is more important - to love him.

But if he knew nothing of science the *Melweisen* would despise him. What such a man would be to the *Melweisen*, the *Herrnhuter* would be to the Theologians.

Lessing when he wrote this discussion was evidently at the point where he was disgusted with the constant quibblings of the clergy and the lack

of consistency between their lives and their belief. For through it all the Herrnhuter stand to him simply for the principle of virtuous living as opposed to dead formulas. And the words, "Der Mensch ward zum Thun - und nicht zum Vernünfteln erschaffen" contain it all in a nutshell.

This is not the Lessing who later himself indulged in so much theorizing on theological subjects and yet the principle remained the same; for it was not the the serious reasoning which one does to ground one's faith that he objected to but the petty stirring over a few dogmas and creeds out of which no good could result to any one.

"Das Christenthum der Vernunft" was probably written about the year 1753 but undoubtedly after the "Gedanken über die Herrnhuter" for Lessing here indulges in a very elaborate process of reasoning of the kind which he seems to have condemned in earlier

writings. Lessing may or may not have really believed all that he sets forth in "Das Christenthum der Vernunft," but ^{his} acute inquiring intellect doubtless took pleasure in working out the scheme he develops here; and yet in the "Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts" he makes almost the same statements also in the form of a hypothesis as if the ideas had not gained in positive-ness in all the intervening years.

Lessing had plainly reached the speculative stage when he wrote "Das Christenthum der Vernunft" and was trying to reason out for himself the ~~fundamental~~ ^{fundamental} doctrines of the Christian religion, namely, the existence of Christ as the Son of God and the nature of the Trinity.

His line of argument is this. With God, Conception (Vorstellen) Willing, (Wollen) and Creating (Schaffen), are one. God can conceive of himself in two ways - either he conceives his perfections (Vollkommenheiten) together and himself as the substance (Inbegriff) of them or he thinks of them as separated and "jede

side von sich selbst nach Graden abgeteilt." God conceived of himself from eternity in all his perfect qualities. That is he created a being which possessed all of his own perfections and this being was the Son of God or better the Son-God, - God because he possesses all of the qualities of God, and Son because we necessarily give a certain priority to the original conception or conceiver. This may be an image (Bild) but an identical image of God.

As to the Holy Spirit, he characterizes it as the harmony existing between God and the Son. The greatest harmony must necessarily exist between two beings which have all qualities in common. And this Harmony between God and Christ the Scriptures call the Holy Spirit. In this Harmony is all that is in the Father and all that is in the Son. Therefore it is itself God. This Harmony however, is in such a manner God that it would not be God if the Father were not God and

the Son not God, and that neither could be God if this Harmony did not exist. Therefore all three are one.

We then pass on to an exposition of the creation of the world on this same principle. God conceived of his perfections as infinitely divided. That is he created things, each one of whom should possess some of his perfect qualities. All these things together constitute the world. These things are created "nach unendlichen Graden des Mehrern und Wenigern welche so auf einander folgen dass nirgends ein Sprung ist;" for that is the most perfect way in which God can conceive of his perfections as divided. Thus a series is constituted in which each member contains all that the lower ones of the series contain and something in addition. Therefore there must exist among all these "unfaceh'ren" a Harmony from which can be explained all that takes place among them, that is, in the world.

Since these things are Gods on a limited scale, their qualities or attributes must be similar to those of God as a

part to the whole. Among the perfect attributes of God is this - that he is able to be conscious of these attributes and act according to them. With the varying degrees of these perfections therefore must be varying degrees of this consciousness and the ability to act according to them. These beings which possess perfect attributes, are conscious of them and have the ability to act in accordance with them are moral beings, that is they can follow a law. This law is inherent in their nature and can be none other than "Handle deinen individualischen Vollkommenheiten gemäss". And this is the essence of Lessing's "natürliche Religion".

This last thought leads us to another of Lessing's theological writings of the year 1755, "Über die Entstehung der geoffenbarten Religion." In this he defines his idea of a natural religion as "einen Gott erkennen, sich die würdevollsten Begriffe von ihm zu machen suchen, und auf diese würdevollsten Begriffe bei allen unsern Hand-

lungen und Gedanken Rücksicht nehmen." Every man according to the measure of his strength is bound by this principle.

But since these powers are different in different men, and therefore the natural religion of one would differ from that of another, men have seen fit to atone for this difference by uniting on certain things and have attached the same importance to these formal (conventionellen) ideas as to the truths of the natural religion in itself. That is, men made a positive out of a natural religion and this positive religion received its sanction through the "Ansehen" of its founder who claimed that its forms (das Conventiuelle) came from God through him in the same way that the essential nature (das Wesentliche) of it comes directly through the reason of each man.

The Unentbehrlichkeit of a positive religion by which the natural religion is modified in every state according to the peculiar characteristics of that state.

he calls the inner Truth of the positive religion and that inner Truth is as great in one religion as in another. All positive religions are therefore, alike true and alike false. True, in that it is necessary everywhere to unite on certain common points; false, in that all that our which people unite does not simply exist with the essential truth but predominates over it and weakens it. And the natural conclusion of it all is that "die beste geoffenbarte oder positive Religion ist die welche die wenigsten conventionellen Zusätze zur natürlichen Religion enthält, die guten Wirkungen der natürlichen Religion am wenigsten einschränkt."

In "Von der Art und Weise der Fortpflanzung der und Ausbreitung der Christlichen Religion," Lessing considers how far, in the natural course of events, the Christian religion would have advanced and tries to prove that this advance was due to no miraculous means. He does this by showing first,

that the Jewish^{religion,} the heathen philosophy, and the Roman religion were all at that time in a state of decay and this made it an auspicious time for the spreading of the Christian Religion; second, that the apostles proceeded according to all possible didactic wisdom in their manner of teaching, roused interest by the purity of their lives and cooperation by their leniency and good-fellowship with all; and third that the persecutions of the Christians were in many cases not real persecutions, were not widespread, and frequently not as much on account of their faith as on account of certain violations of the law which their new manner of life led them into.

In Living's poetry there is not so much to be gathered in regard to his opinions on religion or theology. Poetry was not a serious occupation with him and in only a few of his poems, in some of the Fragments in particular, is the subject seriously

considered. The most important of these is the Fragment entitled "Religion" written in the year 1753. At this time Lessing was again in Berlin and was in that period of doubt when he had been torn loose from his early moorings and was, he felt, drifting too far away and was trying amid surroundings, least propitious to aid him in the endeavor, to regain a foothold on firm ground.

In the beginning of the poem he addresses Religion as "Das göttlichste Geschenk das aus des Schöpfers Hand Dem schwachen Menschen krönt noch über dich, Verstand.
Was du mit Zittern glaubst,
und bald aus Stolz verschmäest,
Was dein neugierig Weib
in fromme Fesseln schliesst.
Dich fühl' ich ehfurchtsovoll
gleich stark als meine Jugend
Das thörichte Geweb'
aus Laster, Fehl, und Tugend."

"Know thyself" is the key to this poem. "Selbsterkenntniss" is the nearest and

surest way to religion; that is, to the natural religion. As one who tries to fathom his true self he wonders what he is and what he will be after that Passing called Death.

"Wisdom is silent here" though man in his "philosophical ravings" thinks he knows. Lessing did not always regard "philosophisches Rausch" in that light but at this period his words cannot always be taken at their apparent meaning.

He looks back over the days of his infancy - a child - knowing no more than an animal; then a playing boy. Then the tendency to evil grows ripe in him.

"Ach, warum wüthete ihr Gift in
 Mark und Blut
 Mit mich verderbender doch angenehmer ^{Wuth;}
 Eh der begirame Geist
 die Tugend kennen lernte
 Von der ihn die Natur
 nicht er sich selbst entfernte!"
 In his soul slept the "Begriff" of good and

evil and when it wakened and the boy
wanted to choose he was "schon bestimmt
in meiner Wahl zu fehlen."

Ich brachte meinen Feind in mir, mit
mir herfür.

Doch Waffen gegen ihn,

die bracht' ich nicht mit mir."

"Laster" he calls a master which he
would but could not escape and which
held him back from following "Tugend."

His spirit is quite long for virtue and
detests evil but cannot choose it.

"Du bist mir Frost und Pein
und an der Tugend Stelle

Beweienswerther Wunsch
mein Himmel meine Hölle

Du nur, du bist in mir
das Einzige reiner Art,

Das einzige was nicht

dem Laster dienstbar ward.

Solch einen heissen Wunsch

solch marternd Unvermögen

Die kann ein Gott zugleich

in eine Seele legen?

Er richtet Zwang als Wahl

und Ohnmacht gleich als Schuld

'Ich will, ich will,' und doch
 bin ich nicht tugendhaft.
 Umsonst erhebt Ihr nur
 des Urtheils strenge Entscheide
 Die Laster kenn' ich all'
 doch kann ich all' vermeiden? "

It is interesting to note the opinion
 of Lessing upon Klopstock, the greatest
 religious poet of the times in Germany.
 He recognized the worth of Klopstock,
 but did not like to see the combinations
 he made of religion and poetry and ^{him} see
 'try to help out the poverty of soul
 by religious "Glanzfarben." He declared
 that orthodoxy made a pedant out of
 Klopstock who turned "Schicksal" into
 "Vorsehung", and the "Muse" into the
 "Sängerin Sions." In other words he
 does not like to see Klopstock's poetry
 subordinated to his religion.

In those of his "Briefe" which deal
 with the "Messias" he turns his
 sharp criticism upon the thought in
 the first few lines in a way that
 plainly indicates that he is at least

no stranger to the consideration of such subjects and that he is not afraid of his ground. He sums up his discussion by saying that even if Klopstock were no poet he was at least a defender of "our" religion more efficient than all the writers of the so called "geretteter Offenbarungen". When Christianity is opposed by Spottereien, serious reasoning is no effective weapon with which to combat them. If the scoffer tries to make religion ridiculous, then its champion must paint it in all its grandeur. Klopstock makes us wish, he says, that the Christian religion were true granted even that we were so unfortunate that it were not.

Whenever Lessing turned his sharp darts of criticism, everything fell before him and the "Aufseher" which Wieland published did not escape the fate of all.

In the eighth of his Litteratur-Briefe, Lessing says of Wieland's "Euph-

findungen eines Christen" that these are not the sentiments of any Christian unless of one who likes to make religion the object of "schönen Danks"; who works himself up into an enthusiasm and believes that that is the true Gefühl "of religion. There are always those who philosophize away religion and those who "wegwitzeln" that their theological writings may amuse. In reference to some of Wieland's high flown religious exaltations, he remarks: "Sind Ausschweifungen der Einbildungskraft Empfindungen? Wo diese beschäftigt ist, da ist ganz gewiss das Herz leer, kalt."

Concerning fanaticism he says in his remarks on Wieland's "Über Gott zu denken" that with a few clear ideas of God and divine perfections the enthusiast gives himself over to feeling and takes the liveliness of feeling for clearness of perception. With fine irony he remarks that

a good Christian is now something very different from what he was thirty or forty years ago. Orthodoxy is become a mockery. One contents himself with a little real knowledge and escapes the accusation of freethinking by exaltation over religion. If one only maintains that without religion one can be no upright man, one may say what he pleases of articles of faith.

"Halten Sie die Klugheit sich gar nicht darüber auszulassen alle sie betreffende Streitigkeiten mit einer frommen Bescheidenheit abzulehnen. O, so sind Sie vollends ein Christ, ein Göttergelehrter so völlig ohne Tadel als ihn die feine religiöse Welt nur immer verlangen wird." And again,

"Also, denn, ist man schon ein Christ wenn man künftige Belohnungen, einen Wohlgefallen der Gottheit an unsern Handlungen, und eine ewige Gerechtigkeit glaubt? Ich meine es gehört noch mehr dazu; und wer ^{jenen} leugnet, leugnet der bloss die geoffenbarte

Religion!"

It is of interest also to hear Lessing's opinion of one other man whose character could not well have escaped his notice especially during his study of the Reformation at Wittenburg. This is the great Reformer himself. It was not in Lessing's nature to consider any one perfect. But he certainly had a great admiration and respect for Luther whose bold fearless nature would appeal strongly to a man of Lessing's independent spirit. In his defence of Lemnius whom Luther persecuted so bitterly simply because he had dedicated a volume of poems to Luther's enemy the archbishop of Mainz, he says; "Luther steht bei mir in solcher Verehrung dass es mir, alles wohl überlegt, recht lieb ist einige kleine Mängel an ihm entdeckt zu haben weil ich in der That der Gefahr sonst nahe war ihn zu vergöttern. Die Spuren der Menschheit die ich an ihm finde sind mir so kostbar als die blendendste seiner Vollkommenheiten."

And when Luther went so far as to say that Semmeling ought to lose his head Lissing exclaims: "Wie tief erniedrigt Zorn und Rache auch den redlichsten, heiligsten Mann!"

We say that Lissing was not an orthodox Christian, and that he opposed revealed or positive religion. In a certain sense, however, the latter is not strictly true. As he says in his discussion of revealed religion, he believes it necessary for men to unite on certain points; he regarded positive religion simply as a formulated natural religion. This same idea he expresses later in his disputations with Göze over the Wolfenbüttel Fragments.

"Die ganze geoffenbarte Religion setzt im geringsten nicht eine vernünftige Religion voraus, sondern schließt sie in sich."

But because positive religion in his time so often meant violation of that principle of tolerance which

is at the root of Lessing's ideas on religion, he opposed it with all the force of his independent nature; but not as a system of belief simply but rather as a collection of dead formulas to which men clung as a saving power instead of depending upon a right relation to God and the living of a pure life in accordance with his own individual abilities.

Lessing, as before remarked, does not belong to any school any more in religion than in literature, but stands alone and above the others men of his age. In his life he was never at rest in any sense of the word but always seeking, always striving in every phase and condition of his existence. The love of freedom was, inborn in him. He was cosmopolitan in everything. He was no more an orthodox patriot than an orthodox Christian.

"Das Lob eines eifrigen Patrioten sei nach seiner Denkungsart das

allerletzte wonach er zeigen würde -
des Patrioten, nämlich, der mich ver-
gessen lehrte dass ich ein Wittburger bin."
The same note of independence rings
in the words in the poem, "Über
die menschliche Glückseligkeit."

"Ich glaub' es ist ein Gott,
und glaub es mit der Welt.
Weil ich es glauben muss
nicht weil es ihr gefällt."

From this it is easy to understand
the nature of the tolerance he advo-
cated all through his life - not the
tolerance of indifference but on the
contrary that of a broad unprejudiced
mind.

In speaking of Diderot he touches
on this point again. "Gesetzt auch ein
solcher Weltweise wagt es Meinungen
zu bestreiten die wir geheiligt haben.
Der Schaden ist klein. Seine Träume
oder Wahrheiten, wie man sie nennen
will, werden die Gesellschaft um so
wenig Schaden thun als vielen Schaden
ihre diejenige thun welche die Drucker
'Stähler Linnings Leben.

aller Menschen unter das Joch der
ihrigen bringen wollen."

Thus he feels the need of estab-
lishing everything for himself. In a
letter to his father as early as May 1749
he writes: "Die christliche Religion ist
kein Werk das man von seinen Eltern
auf Treu und Glaube annehmen soll
Die meisten erben sie zwar von ihnen
ebenso wie ihr Vermögen aber sie zeigen
durch ihre Aufführung auch was vor
rechtschaffne Christen sie sind."

Though often a doubter, Lessing was
never a scoffer but was ever deeply
serious in any matter pertaining to re-
ligion. The attitude of Voltaire who along
with his scathing satire indulged in
the coarsest witticisms, regarding
nothing too holy or revered to be the
object of his rude sallies - this attitude
could never have been Lessing's.

Nor was Lessing a deist like Voltaire
and his followers. God was not to
him simply the motive force of the
world, a vague, indefinite, mechanical

Being but something much more real
and personal. In the fragment entitled
"Wer die menschliche Glückseligkeit," he
speaks of the necessity of belief in God.

"G'nug, wer Gott leugnen kann,
muss sich auch leugnen können.

Bin ich, so ist auch Gott;
er ist von mir zu trennen,

Ich aber nicht von ihm.

Er wär', wär' ich auch nicht.

Und ich fühl' was in mir
das für sein Dasein spricht.

Neh dem der es nicht fühlt
und doch will glücklich werden.

Gott aus dem Himmel treibt
und diesen sucht auf Erden."

Moreover, he continues, if God does not
exist, if he does not govern the world,
and we are in it only by chance,
if there is no higher agency in joy
or suffering, why does not man
destroy himself in pain or sorrow?
Because God is and rules the world,
man can endure change and trouble.

Lissing makes frequent references

to Providence but it is difficult to tell sometimes whether they are uttered simply in a general way with regard to the future and without any idea of divine agency or whether they really express his belief in a higher controlling power. In advocating the leaving of politics to politicians he says: "Man lasse solchen Stoff denen welche die Vorsicht erwählte ihn auszuüben."

Here "Vorsicht" is plainly a general term for conditions, or a man's special abilities.

There is rather a different tone however, in these words which occur in one of his letters: "Sich langwierige Krankheiten und ich weiss nicht was für Umstände, ^{befürchten} die einen besser Stand zu arbeiten setzen könnten zeigt ein schlechtes Vertrauen auf die Vorsicht."

And yet in most cases when he refers to Vorsicht or Vorsehung, he seems to have in mind rather a trust that all will be well in the future, a lack of anxiety for what may come, than any settled belief in the care of

God for the individual. In a letter to Michaelis in 1754 he writes: "Was noch kommen soll habe ich der Vor-
sicht überlassen. Ich glaube schwerlich
dass ein Mensch gegen das Zukünftige
gleichgültiger sein kann als ich," by
which he means, however, not a future
life but merely what is to come in the
present life.

In a New Year's letter to his father he
writes: "Ihren besonders, liebster Vater,
wünsche ich noch viele gesunde und
vergnügte Jahre welche die Vorsicht Ihnen
von der Zahl der meinen legen wolle."

In other letters he uses "Gott" and "der
Himmel" in much the same way.

In a criticism of a tragedy he uses
the term "Vorsicht" with perhaps the
closest and most literal significance.

"Die Vernunft verbietet mir meinem
Elend durch meine Zerstörung ein
Ende zu machen. Warum? Weil ich
alle Augenblicke hoffen darf ohne dieses
gewaltsame Mittel mein Elend geendet
zu sehen. Die Vorsicht kann es enden
und wird es enden sobald es mir denkbare"

rit."

Sometimes we find references which seem to indicate that Lessing believed in a blind fate, luck, or chance.

In the poem "An den Herrn N-" occur the words: "Freund noch sind ich und Du dem Glücke ein leichter Schlunderball."

But it must be borne in mind that this is poetry, and also that we must guard against reading too much meaning into what a man says. We are all too much given to using these terms "Providence", "Luck" etc. too freely to permit us to draw too firm conclusions from the way in which this man may have used them.

In regard to a future life Lessing plainly believed that there is one in which conditions are better than they are here, but up to 1765 we find no very definite utterances on the subject. In the poem to Herr N- we have the lines:

Vielleicht das erst in andern Welt
Letter to Heinrich von
Gersdorff, 1768.

wir müder elend sind."

Again in the poem "An die Lyer" -

"Er vergräbt sein Leben sich in Tiefsinn,
Um erst dann zu leben wann er Staub
wird sein."

In his "Kritische Briefe" of 1753 he writes concerning the death of a friend with whom he had had some slight disagreement: "Und in diesem Augenblicke müsse er sterben um euch in jener Welt mit einem schrecklichen Gerichte zu erwarten."

Evidently at the time at which he wrote his fragment on "Religion" 1753, he was in doubt as to what this future life may be. "Wisdom is silent here"; and "Durchforschet, Sterbliche, des Lebens kurzen Raum

Was kommen soll ist Nacht;
Was hin ist ist ein Traum.

Yet he seems never to have had any fears on the subject nor any dread of death for himself or others, for he says plainly: "Ich sehe nicht ein warum man nicht ein folgendes

Sehr so ruhig erwarten kann als wie den folgenden Tag."

On hearing of the death of his brother he wrote: "Ich habe seinen Tod empfinden als man nur einen solchen Zufall empfinden konnte und mehr vielleicht als man ihn empfinden sollte."

The foundation idea in Lessing's opposition to a revealed religion in these earlier days is that the life lived speaks louder for or against than the doctrines believed in. He grants that revealed religion increases one's motives for acting uprightly, for there is the hope of a future reward but religion has higher aims than simply to make the upright man. It takes him for granted to begin with and aims to lift him up to higher purposes.

In one of his letters of 1749 to his father he gives most clearly his opinion of those who follow the letter of the law rather than the spirit.

"So lange ich nicht sehe dass man

eines der vornehmsten Gebote des Christenthums, seinem Feind zu lieben, nicht besser beobachtet so lange zweifle ich ob diejenigen Christen sind die sich davor ausgeben."

We need nothing more to be able to understand the bitterly hostile attitude towards the "Geistlichen" of his time against whom he never misses an opportunity of directing his sharp arrows of criticism and satire and whom he regards as the most bigoted, intolerant class of men the time ever shone upon. In one of the fragments occurs the following passage which is at the same time a sarcasm directed against the clergy and against the church formulas of faith which will not bear investigation by reason.

"Die grubelnde Vernunft
dringt sich in alles ein
Und will wo sie nicht herrscht
doch nicht entbehret sein.
Ihr flucht die Orthodox
denn sie will seinem Glauben
An dem Herrn Marburg."

der blinde Folger heischt
Den alten Beifall rauben."

He had no good opinion of preachers
as speakers and declared that the
comedian could teach the pastor a
lesson.

"Wenn man itziger Zeit etwas
mehr Fleiss darauf wendete, so
würde man gewiss mehr Redner
als Stöcke auf unsern Kanzeln
finden, und diejenigen die oft
einem Rasenden ähnlicher sind als
einem Apostel würden mit mehrerer
Mässigung und Annehmlichkeit zu
reden wissen."

Finally in a recension of 175-4 of
"Gedanken über die Herrnhuter" he
remarks: "Es ist ein Glück dass
noch hier und da ein Gottegelehrter
auf das Praktische des Christenthums
gedruckt zu einer Zeit da sich die
allermeisten in unfruchtbaren Streit-
igkeiten verheeren - bald einen ein-
fältigen Herrnhuter verdammen; bald
einen noch einfältigern Religions -

spötter durch ihre sogenannte Wider-
legungen neuen Stoff zum Spotten
geben etc.

It is only fair to consider for a
moment as a test of Lessing's right to
say what he does of the right life
versus dependence of a positive belief,
and a test of the practicalness of
the religion of the man, the kind of
life he himself led. We know that
it was a peculiar life, in many
respects, not like that of other men.
It seemed as if often he had a right
to complain of that Glück which so
seldom came to him. It seemed
frequently as if the very things he
wished for most were the very ones
to elude his grasp, as if the good
fortune that came to other men were
not destined to come to him.

Lessing's conviction of this is felt in
his heart cry at the death of his only
child: "Ich wollte es auch einmal so
gut haben wie andere Menschen!"

But though Lessing led a most

unsettled life and seemingly could never be long contented in any place, but was, as he himself said, "Ein Sperling auf dem Dache"; yet his manner of life was never a reproach to him. It was never dissipated and never frivolous. Much as his parents and friends were shocked at his intimacy with the comedians at Leipzig, there was nothing in it which pointed to evil tendencies on Lessing's part, but merely an interest in their art rather than in themselves. In Berlin he was a hard worker and led a quiet life though he had many friends and enjoyed them. If any period of his life could be a reproach to him, it would be the time he spent at Breslau as the secretary of General Tarentzev; and if he had any vice it was that of gaming which was a passion that followed him through life. But the conditions of life at Breslau at that time must serve as a partial excuse

for him while there.

No one could have any thing but praise for him in his relations to other men. He was generous and whole-souled, unprejudiced, frank, and sincere. His friendship with Kleist would rank with those famous in literature. But above all, his love and reverence for his parents are to be admired. Though he was often misunderstood by them, blamed and reproached for many things which were not his fault, never never do we find in any of his correspondence a disrespectful word or any but the most loving sentiments. Always considerate for their welfare, he aided them with money when he had scarcely a penny himself and there was no greater reason why his constant poverty was a source of grief to him than that it prevented him from doing as much as his generous nature prompted to make life happy and comfortable for his father and mother.

in their old age. And knowing what pain his unorthodox views on religion caused his father, he withheld from publication until after his fathers death several articles which he knew would grieve him.

In his business relations he was the soul of honesty and uprightness. Though he was often in debt and pursued by his creditors he managed somehow to pay them, and in many cases his debts were a result of his generosity to his family and friends. While at Breslau he was in a most advantageous position to accumulate wealth by speculating as many others did yet he never could bring himself to it as to his upright nature the means did not seem to justify the gain.

While he admired Voltaires ability, and regarded him as one of the greatest intellects of his age, he despised the man as a man and would never have stooped to the language and

actions of which Voltaire was only too often guilty.

However different ones, according to their difference of standpoint, may praise or censure Lessing and the views he held there can be no doubt that in religion as well as in literature he was one of the great spirits of the eighteenth century in Germany.

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